



CASE STUDY:

**DIOCESE OF PITTSBURGH, NEW CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL  
PITTSBURGH, PA**

## HOW CAN A CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL SERVE AS A MODEL FOR THE ENTIRE COUNTRY?

*“Our mission challenges every teacher to see in that child the potential they have as a son and daughter of God, and the dignity. They have a purpose and what we do is really to set that free, help them achieve so their inner self is really going to come out and flourish.”*

—Diocesan Leader

### challenge

To uncover the emotional experience of a Catholic education and define the attributes of a physical environment that will support and nurture that experience.

### methods

fathom, working with the project architects, looked deeply into the student experience to understand what it truly means to attend a Catholic High School. The team engaged 7th and 8th grade students, high school students, Catholic and public school students, parents, families, alumni, donors, and Diocesan leadership through creative Discovery Sessions and thoughtful one-on-one interviews. Site visits to schools both local to Pittsburgh and across the country grounded the team and gave perspective on current and future trends in school design.

### findings

fathom uncovered three themes that defined people’s thoughts and feelings about the ideal Catholic High School experience. The themes of **Connection, Culture, Community; Growth, Guidance, Grace;** and **Renewal, Respect, Reflection** informed and inspired the architectural team towards a design solution that will address mind, body, and soul.

### themes in design

- **Connection, Culture, Community** is emphasized in the building’s master plan, which incorporates an interior courtyard that opens to the surrounding landscape, and a visual connection between main roadways and the wooded site.
- **Growth, Guidance, Grace** is evident in the use and preservation of the site’s natural beauty and contours as well as spaces within the school that encourage interaction.
- **Renewal, Respect, Reflection** is translated into the design of the building through the layering of materials and color, while allowing for a balance of transparency and privacy. The placement of the chapel on the site and its constant visibility also emphasizes this theme.

## DIocese OF PITTSBURGH, NEW CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL



**Student of Today**  
CURRENT CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

*My name is Maria*

*I'm 16 and a sophomore in Catholic High School*

*My favorite class: French II*

*My favorite school memory (So far): Homeroom Saturday parties*

*I love learning to drive and pickup soccer with friends ♥*

*My individual gifts: playing soccer and singing*

*My Typical Day:*

*I get dropped off by my dad - Prayer group, 8:30am - English, Chemistry, Religion class - Lunch (I usually pick my own) - 3 more classes - Student Government meeting - Study with friends - I get picked up by my Mom - Dinner with the Family - more studying - Sleep!*

*My Generation: Y*

**Student of Tomorrow**  
PERSONA THREE:  
CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENT

*My name is JASON!*

*I'm 13 and in 8th grade at a Catholic Elementary school.*

*My favorite teacher is our science teacher because her classes are about how things work in the real world, and we get to do lots of hands on lessons.*

*I want my Catholic High School to be a place where I can meet new people but still feel like it's a family.*

*I love football and hanging out with my older brother Scott.*

*My individual gifts: building things and video games.*

*My generation: Z*

## 10 Ways to Design a Model Catholic School

- 1. Embrace Community Cultivation** - encourage access and integration with the communities that surround a school all the way out into the global community. There are lessons to be learned outside of the classroom that foster an understanding of how the world works and an individual's place in that world.
- 2. Plan for Spontaneity** - give students and teachers the opportunity to find inspiration and joy in the journey of learning, to experiment, search in offline ways and consequently discover new and sometimes amazing things. The element of surprise engages students, keeps things fresh, and aides in the creation of memorable experiences.
- 3. View the Corporation as Teacher** - invite companies who are leaders in their field to share knowledge, provide real world experience, and foster meaningful partnerships. Students yearn for the opportunity to apply knowledge in ways that are current and relevant.
- 4. Reflect and Connect** - support a student's need to feel connected to something bigger than himself or herself, faith and spirituality. Discover ways to balance the dynamic energy of learning with time and space to reflect upon personal growth.
- 5. Disrupt Classroom Hierarchy** - the teacher is a guide, but not a guru. Allow students to teach each other, develop learning tools, and ask questions. While mentorship is important, students and teachers can support each other in discovering individual gifts and envision new ways of learning.
- 6. Use Technology as a Means, Not an End** - technology is an ever-present fact of life that should blend as seamlessly into the classroom experience as it does everyday life. Students have the innate ability to adapt to change and embrace technological advances; the classroom should do so as well.
- 7. Be A Sum of Parts** - a successful school and a desirable learning experience is based on teaching and evaluating to the individual talents and abilities of the student. The new model of education requires a deeper understanding of the student and their educational experience.
- 8. Flex Your Space** - in both space and curriculum. Both the ability to move around within the classroom and the opportunity to relate to events as they happen are key teaching tools and the feeling of control over the experience empowers students and teachers alike.
- 9. Cross-Pollinate** - collaborate across grades, disciplines, schools, and even cultures to strengthen the school community and provide a rich learning experience. Knowledge and experiences are passed down; new ideas rise up. Opportunities for mentorship appear, and relationships become more personal and meaningful.
- 10. Grow Roots and Branches** - tradition and a sense of longevity are important, and should foster the formation of new rituals and ideas. A strong, yet welcoming foundation, and a sense of shared experience provide the tools and support to shape the future of not only the school, but also oneself.

Keep these ten directives in mind as you read about the themes introduced in the following pages.